

Rutland Herald & Times Argus Archives

THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

The article you requested is displayed below.

Keep Vermont on track

Author(s): HOWARD DEAN **Date:** May 27, 2009 **Section:**
OPINION04

severe national recession has gripped our state and resulted in a major reduction to state budget revenues. Speaking from experience, I understand the difficult choices our leaders must make to balance the budget. The Legislature has passed a bill that makes major cuts to state spending while at the same time using the federal stimulus funds as President Obama intended - as a bridge to better times. We should all now support the difficult decisions that our Legislature has made to balance the need to cut our budget, harsh as those cuts may be, and invest in our future. The Legislature has been forced to slash spending on many things: education scholarships, state employees, investments into construction of affordable housing, and investments into farmland conservation.

Investments into economic and community development are vital to our future and something we must remain true to in good and bad times. One of the most effective economic investment strategies Vermont has used for the past 20 years is public investment into the construction of permanently affordable housing and conservation of our farms and forests.

We were reminded how important these investments are by the recent work of the Council on the Future of Vermont. After two years of work and contact with more than 4,000 Vermonters, the Council highlights the intense value Vermonters place on our working lands, towns and village centers. An independent poll found that 97 percent of Vermonters rated our working and open landscape as their most important shared value. That landscape is also an economic engine and the heart of our distinctive "Vermont Brand."

The Vermont Housing and Conservation Board's economic development program is the main way our state invests in these key values. It is proven as both a great tool for economic stimulus and a way to improve our long-term future. It creates construction jobs by building and renovating affordable housing, while helping to revitalize our downtowns and village centers. It allows a new generation of dairy farmers to gain access to land, while laying the foundation for

agricultural diversification, valued-added food products and the local food movement.

The Legislature's budget includes a major, and, perhaps, disproportionate cut of 50 percent in its state appropriation. But, while this investment level misses opportunity to stimulate the economy, it at least keeps this valuable strategy moving forward during these tough times.

The governor's proposal reduces the state's commitment to the housing and conservation effort by an alarming 85 percent and calls for the total elimination of the working land conservation investments. This goes too far. Here is the likely result:

The creation of new affordable housing will drop from 400 units annually to under 100, losing the opportunity to create construction jobs at a time they are badly needed.

Farms revitalized with conservation investments will drop from 20-25 annually to 0.

Vermont will return \$5 million in unused farmland protection money to the federal government instead of putting it into Vermont farm businesses.

Farm business viability assistance will drop from 45-50 farms a year to zero.

Community conservation investments (town forests, recreation areas) will be eliminated.

The lead paint mitigation program (which protects young children from high lead levels) will be eliminated resulting in the loss of \$1 million of federal funds.

Forty Americorps workers, for which Vermont receives \$1 million in federal funds, will probably have to be laid off for lack of a \$215,000 state match.

Going this far does not make sense and it would effectively tear apart the community infrastructure that has served our towns and our farmers so well.

I hope the Legislature and the governor will take the long view of the budget dilemma we find ourselves in. When I was governor, I always said the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board is part of our "100-year plan." Budget fights will come and go over the next century, but expenditures for affordable housing and conservation of our forests and farms will make the kind of lasting changes in Vermont our grandchildren will judge us by.

Howard Dean is former governor of the state of Vermont.

Technical problems: If you have a technical problem with your account please e-mail newslibrary@newsbank.com.

Copyright, 2009, The Times Argus